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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000161

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KU

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION MPS SUSTAIN CALLS TO "GRILL" PRIME MINISTER

REF: A. 2008 KUWAIT 1259

1B. KUWAIT 111

1C. 2008 KUWAIT 1166

1D. 2008 KUWAI 1187

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

11. (C) Though the Kuwaiti Parliament is on recess for the February 24-25 national and liberation holidays, this respite only delays until its March 3 reconvening the targeting of PM Shaykh Nasser for opposition grilling. The beleaguered PM, who has been out of the country for the past two weeks, faces grilling from multiple sides for his alleged failure to plan for the economic crisis; mishandling of the KDOW and Fourth Refinery deals; misappropriation of public funds; questionable granting of citizenship, and failure to make consumer debt forgiveness a high priority. Grilling the PM remains in many minds a tripwire to parliamentary dissolution, leading to speculation that the Amir may do so as early as March, perhaps simultaneously calling for the PM's resignation. Whatever happens, most Kuwaitis agree that a simple shift in personalities will not resolve the inherent flaws in their existing democratic machinery. Other rumors suggest that if he dissolves parliament, the Amir may offer the public some degree of relief from private debts to soften the blow. End Summary.

ICM Stands Fast on Plans to Grill the PM

12. (C) The Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM - Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood), viewed widely as the best organized and most politically astute association in Kuwait, leads the charge of those wishing to grill PM Shaykh Nasser Al-Muhammad Al Sabah. The ICM has decried the PM's perceived weakness in handling crucial projects like KDOW and the Fourth Refinery (ref A) and his alleged failure to invest Kuwait's sovereign wealth effectively. (Note: Despite the fact it has done better than most - ref B. End note.). The ICM has resisted appeals by the government and some MPs to drop its grilling project and, through its firebrand MP Dr. Nasser Al-San'e, declared that it will proceed with its decision to grill the PM in March, a call echoed by fellow brotherhood member, Jam'an Al-Hirbish. Al-Hirbish stated that should the PM try to sidestep the grilling, the ICM would call for a vote of non-cooperation (a symbolic vice substantive move) against him.

ICM in a Rebuilding Phase

13. (C) By targeting Shaykh Nasser, ICM seeks to restore public confidence in its ability to influence events, thereby

laying the groundwork for success in elections which it anticipates could occur soon. The May 2008 National Assembly elections, largely deemed a victory for tribal MPs (septel), served as a rude wake-up call for the association, which suffered surprising losses and succeeded in winning only three seats. ICM also managed to keep one of its representatives, Mohammed Al-Olaim, in charge of the high-profile Ministry of Oil. However, ICM soon found itself locked in a dispute with its traditional allies, the Islamists, over the KDOW and Fourth Refinery projects, and Al-Olaim, a respected technocrat, found himself the sacrificial lamb in the GOK's efforts to appease rather than confront parliamentary opposition to the two projects. He was replaced by the PM in February by ruling family member (and previously ousted Health Minister) Shaykh Abdullah Al-Ahmed Al Sabah, himself not known for being a forceful player.

#### Grilling Over Stimulus Package

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¶4. (C) Liberal MPs from the Popular Action Bloc (PAB), though not notable for their loyalty to the PM, initially tried to forestall ICM's grilling of him, contending that the effort distracts from more important corruption allegations against the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation over the KDOW and Fourth Refinery projects. (Note: Allegations of corruption have not been aimed at Al-Olaim. End note.) However, the PAB, on February 16, hinted that it too may enter the grilling game over its opposition to a new government-sponsored economic stimulus bill (ref B). Press reports indicate that the PAB is weighing its options to

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"question the government" if this bill -- which it deems a waste of public funds to bail out fiscally irresponsible investors -- passes.

#### Bailout for All

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¶5. (C) Also targeting the PM over the stimulus package is Islamist MP Dr. Dhaifallah Bou Ramya, one of the champions in favor of exploiting Kuwait's public wealth to pay off private consumer debt. He argues that if the GOK can bail out the banks and companies who have pursued fiscally irresponsible policies then it should also forgive the debt of average citizens.

#### Al-Mulaifi's Grilling: On Simmer

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¶6. (C) Per ref C, MP Ahmed Al-Mulaifi delayed for three months his November threat to grill the PM on grounds the PM mismanaged or misappropriated public funds and committed irregularities in granting Kuwaiti nationality to certain individuals who did not qualify. The Council of Ministers responded to Al-Mulaifi's barrages on February 9 by referring charges of misappropriation of public funds by the PM to the Public Prosecutor and by authorizing the Higher Nationality Committee to withdraw Kuwaiti nationality from those deemed undeserving. Satisfied, at least for now, Al-Mulaifi has stepped back from his grilling request.

#### Comment:

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¶7. (C) The Amir has often asserted that attempts to grill the PM would cross the red line requiring his intervention. Increasingly, however, one hears rumors that his patience has worn thin with his collegial but persistently ineffectual PM -- who has tried and failed four times to construct and manage a government. While many continue to believe it unlikely that the Amir will allow the highly unpalatable option of a public grilling (particularly given the chance that lines of questioning might inevitably lead to him),

others suggest he may both dissolve the parliament and 'allow' the PM to submit his resignation simultaneously, thus offering something for everyone and essentially making a "clean break."

¶8. (C) While Kuwaitis and outside observers can only speculate as to what tricks remain up the politically wily Amir's sleeve, what seems painfully clear is that changing the personalities alone will not solve Kuwait's democratic woes. To draw on a metaphor explored at length in ref D, Kuwait's democracy is a beloved but decrepit jalopy held together by glue and baling wire. Changing a few parts here and there will not produce a new and more efficient car; and reshuffling the PM will not fix the problems in Kuwait's system of governance. Even if a more forceful and attractive successor to the present PM were in sight (and there is no one at present who fills the bill), the fundamental flaws in Kuwait's system would remain. The system needs more than tinkering; it needs an overhaul. Still, like that beloved old jalopy that keeps on chugging down the road, most Kuwaitis continue to feel they can get some more mileage out of their current system. As the global economic crisis and other political and economic challenges continue to mount, however, we can expect more and more Kuwaitis to begin kicking tires and thinking about investing in a newer model. End comment.

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